

THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

Initially a solitary escape from grief, Kirsty Mitchell's project *Wonderland* grew into a six-and-a-half-year series that changed her life, hears David Clark



Kirsty Mitchell's *Wonderland* project is one of the more extraordinary photography stories of recent years. Fuelled by escapist fantasy and a very real journey through grief, it's an intensely personal series which has taken six and a half years to complete.

When she began it, Mitchell's work was virtually unknown, but she's now an award-winning fine-art photographer represented by a prestigious London Mayfair gallery.

The popularity of her work is indicated by the response to the Kickstarter campaign to publish a book of the *Wonderland* photographs, launched in September 2015. Within 28 days it had raised more than £330,000 to become the most successful photobook project in Kickstarter's history.

Two months after securing the funding, her life was 'complete chaos'. As well as supervising every detail of the book's production, she was giving her studio a major overhaul, and was heavily pregnant with her first child – Finch, who was born on Christmas Eve.

However, far from buckling under this pressure, she was thriving on it.

Mitchell, 39, is intriguing: like her work, she's very open and emotional, yet full of strength and determination. Passionately driven and, she says, 'an unbearable perfectionist', she has been uncompromising in pursuing her vision and has been rewarded with greater success than she could have imagined.

After studying fine art, photography and the history of art from the age of 16 she focused on fashion, undertaking an honours degree in fashion design and textiles at Ravensbourne College of Art. She worked as an intern for Alexander McQueen and Hussein Chalayan before spending 10 years as a senior designer for Karen Millen. It was during this period, in 2007, that she began to experiment with street photography.

**'SOMEHOW, TAKING
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PREVIOUS PAGE
The Beautiful
Blindness of Devotion
(left)
The Pure Blood of a
Blossom (right)

THIS PAGE
The Queen's Armada
(above)
The Stars of Spring
Will Carry You Home
(right)





'I WAS DRAWN TO RUNNING OFF TO THE WOODS, CREATING A MORE BEAUTIFUL EXPERIENCE THAN I HAD IN REALITY'

However, the real turning point in Mitchell's life came in 2008, when her mother, Maureen, was diagnosed with brain cancer. 'The situation was such a trauma that I just completely shut down,' she remembers. 'My only way of dealing with it was through the camera. I wanted to create pictures and had these ideas, but was too scared to approach a model, so I used myself.' Mitchell posted a sombre series of self-portraits, titled *Nocturne*, on Flickr.

'Somehow, taking pictures of myself and posting them on the internet was kind of a bizarre release,' she says. 'Some of them are extremely hard to look at, but it was the beginning of me wanting to experiment and tell stories in photographs.'

Maureen, an English teacher for 30 years, died from cancer in 2008 in a small French village, where her funeral took place. Due to the location, it was only attended by a small group of people. Mitchell felt it hadn't reflected the impact she'd had on so many young people's lives. Six months later, in memory of her mother, she started *Wonderland*. It was directly inspired by the fairy tales Maureen had told her as a child.

'I was doing an important and demanding job in London, but I was

falling apart,' she says. 'I had depression and was becoming more and more reclusive, so I was drawn to running off to the woods and creating a more beautiful experience than I had in reality. Then I started releasing the images on Flickr and created a little blog which two people would read if I was lucky.'

However, Mitchell's imaginative images of characters such as the White Queen and the Lavender Princess, combined with her soul-baring blog, touched a nerve with an increasing number of people. Its popularity quietly snowballed as the images became increasingly elaborate. In 2011, she gave up her fashion design job to concentrate on photography.

Throughout the making of the pictures, she was determined that they showed real things she had created, rather than being assembled digitally. 'Like everyone, I use Photoshop to process and retouch my photographs,'

she says, 'but it's important to me that I physically make the costumes and props myself by hand, which can take up to five months for one shot.'

'I worked with a really tiny team, usually my husband, a hair and make-up artist and a model. I might also have a couple of assistants. We went through extraordinary days where a monumental effort went on for hours to get one shot. If I'd just sat in a room and made it all up on a computer, I wouldn't have had those incredible experiences.'

Wonderland's popularity moved to a new level in 2012, when it was featured on the *Daily Mail* website. Virtually overnight, the story went viral and Mitchell was deluged with emails from all over the world.

'It went completely insane,' she says. 'A lot of those messages were from people pouring out their hearts about the people they had lost – their child, their mother, their father. Some of them were incredibly hard to read but they said they saw beauty in the photographs and the diary entries meant so much to them.'

Mitchell's personal relationship with her audience is a key part of her success. However, although this relationship has been developed via social media, she's adamant that this



Clockwise, from facing page: The Ghost Swift, Gaia's Promise and a *Wonderland* self-portrait



ON MY RADAR

Three visionaries who have inspired Kirsty Mitchell's work



Alexander McQueen

'I worked with him for a year in 1999, when he got his second London studio. He was incredibly intense and driven, and to me he was such an unspeakable genius. He took fashion and turned it into an artform and made huge stage productions with everything real. That idea has stayed with me.'



Gregory Crewdson

'I really admire his work. I met him last year and I just think he's an incredible artist. He will dedicate months to creating an image and put himself through hell to make it. He's so deeply emotional about his work and everything about it has to be right and perfect. I love the scale of what he does.'



Nick Cave

'Nick is an artist who creates extraordinary and bizarre sculptures, which he calls 'soundsuits'. They are worn by people but are also living, breathing pieces of art. His idea is to use the human body in a fine-art form and his work takes clothing way beyond anything seen before.'



kind of popularity in itself is not a passport to success.

'You can't magically create a fan base,' she says. 'If people like your work, they relate to it. It's as simple as that. You have to be who you are, but most of all you have to engage with people. Social media is wonderful, but it doesn't get you into galleries and it doesn't get you book deals. At the end of the day, it's the work that matters.'

The last *Wonderland* photograph was made in November 2014 and although she already had a publisher for the project, she decided to walk away from that deal and self-publish. She says it was 'a terrifying decision', but was determined to make the book exactly as she wanted. Once the highly rated designer Stuart Smith was on board, the book began to take shape.

The finished *Wonderland* book, which runs to 480 pages and weighs 5kg, includes the stories behind the 74 images in the series and a colossal 65,000 words of Mitchell's personal diary. Every aspect of the book's presentation and production has had to

reach the highest professional standards. 'I wouldn't accept anything unless it was the best it could possibly be,' Mitchell says.

'I wanted a book that felt like an extension of the series and not a commercial afterthought. After all these years, I wanted the people who have supported the series to own something that felt precious and valuable to them.'

In the final stages of completing the book, Mitchell and her husband went to a location she had used previously. There they took one final symbolic self-portrait for the end of the book, showing her heavily pregnant. 'This book is a circle of life, love and loss, and in the final pages there's me ready to go on to a new stage,' she says. 'It's the perfect end. The timing is extraordinary. You couldn't make it up if you tried.'

Now *Wonderland* is complete, Mitchell is also going on to a new stage in her work. 'I will do other projects and other books, but this is my one huge emotional outpouring for a very special person,' she says. 'I won't do anything like this again, not on this scale, no way.'

Her next project is linked to storytelling; the pictures she has in mind will 'absolutely blow people's socks off'. Motherhood will clearly be her priority and her legions of fans will have to be patient, but if these images are anything like her *Wonderland* creations, they will be worth the wait.

DARE TO DREAM

Kirsty Mitchell on her most challenging image

'This image, *She'll Wait For You in the Shadows of Summer*, was one of the biggest productions I've ever done. I wanted it to look genuinely overgrown, so in February 2013, six months before the shoot, I took the boat to the location.

Every month or so, I went back to check on it. I would try to guide ivy in a particular direction, or spray bleach on to the sails. Slowly but surely it bedded down. The model is about nine feet high and the dress, which I designed, took 20 people one month to make.

Then, on the day, it took around 16 hours to get everything tied around her and linked to the boat. It was also the first time I'd ever used a proper lighting rig on set. All these terrifying elements came together and I'd never felt so out of control. That one definitely nearly killed me.'

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